A Comparative study of Pronominal Choices in the Discourse on Environmental Degradation Among Pakistani and Bangladeshi Students in Austria

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Corresponding Author: **Dr. Ayisha Khurshid,** Assistant Professor, National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan	The present paper analyses the pronominal choices in the discourse of international students on environmental degradation. The comparative analysis reveals that each interviewee has his/ her own preference towards personal and possessive pronouns. Each interviewee has switched from one pronoun to another, which reveals their multiple identities. The use of *I* and its variants has been used to indicate individual opinions and views. With respect to *We* and its variants, they are used to show inclusion in multiple communities, and at the same time to foster the idea of shared responsibility. With respect to the second person pronoun, the audiences are varied. Similarly, *they* and its variants are used to refer to multiple actors who can play their role in overcoming environmental degradation. Moreover, the collocation network for each pronoun aids in understanding the meanings carried by each pronoun.

Introduction:

The function words, though considered semantically poor, can reveal much more about a person's personality than the content words. (Pennebaker, 2011). The 'quiet words' (Ibid, 14) are contextually dependent to convey the embedded meaning. Among the function words, pronouns are considered to be of much significance as they can be used not only to avoid repetition, but rather can perform various pragmatic functions. Contextually dependent, their

multiple functions can be analysed by taking into consideration physical and social settings. Pronouns are also considered to be the markers of identity. As identities are not fixed, the switching of one pronoun over the other by the speaker can lead to interesting results.

In this paper, we will argue how international students in Austria belonging to Bangladesh and Pakistan include or exclude themselves in the discourse on environmental degradation. Similarly, the present paper also argues how the interviewees, by using various pronouns carry multiple identities. As pronouns are contextually dependent, collocation networks of pronouns are also analysed to scrutinize how the interviewees' pronominal choices are interlinked with the contextual information.

Literature Review

Personal pronouns can be used as a self-positioning strategy where the speaker can use them to perform a variety of pragmatic functions like stating one's opinion, and depicting solidarity with the audience etc. (Urzua, 2013). They can be used to mark inclusion and exclusion. But for elucidating the meaning behind the use of personal pronouns, contextual knowledge is required, implying that they are dependent upon the contextual setting. (Miltersen, 2016).

The first-person pronouns, either in singular or plural forms can be used to set up the identities. (Krapivkina, 2014). But the meanings attached to the pronouns are not fixed but are rather dynamic. (Wilson, 1990). '*I*' and its variants are assigned different roles, especially in academic discourse, such as 'representative, guide, architect, re-counter, opinion holder, and originator.' (Krapivkina, 2014).

The pronouns are also used especially by politicians to create multiple identities for themselves by using *I, we,* and *us*. (Bramley, 2001). This signifies that in a single discourse, the speaker, through the use of pronouns, can carry multiple identities, i.e., in a speech or interview, one can carry an individual voice and simultaneously present oneself as a member of a larger community.

The second-person pronoun is used to refer to the communication partner and is often regarded as the pronoun of address. (Mora, 2013). But its case is a bit complicated as it can refer to a specific audience or can refer to everyone. (Bramley, 2001).

They can be used by the speaker to exclude oneself from others and can assign positive or negative values to that particular group. It implies that it can be used as a marker to distance oneself from others.

Apart from the qualitative-based research on the pronouns, in "*The Secret life of Pronouns*", Pennebaker (2011) elucidates how computational methods can be employed to study the meanings carried by the pronouns in texts. From his perspective, using computer-based analysis, hidden meanings behind the use of pronouns can reveal much about the personality of a speaker.

The objective of this research is twofold.

- To understand how the speakers belonging to different communities position themselves in the discourse on environmental degradation through the use of personal and possessive pronouns.
- To scrutinize the stronger collocates with the pronouns to establish the relationship between pronouns and the issues discussed by the speakers.

Methodology

For the purpose of this research, interviews with two international students belonging to Bangladesh and Pakistan have been conducted. Five questions from each participant have been asked and then transcribed. The questions are as follows

1. How would you define environmental degradation?
2. What are the main reasons for environmental degradation in your country?
3. What are the major problems arising from unhealthy environmental practices in your country?

4. What are some of the measures taken in your country at the government and non-government levels?
5. How do you think environmental degradation can be minimized in your country/ region?
6. For the purpose of analysis, they have been saved in individual plain text files. Wordsmith and Graph Coll are both used to study the pronominal choices among the international students. Furthermore, the pronominal choices are limited to personal and possessive pronouns to scrutinize the positioning of the speakers in the discourse. In order to study the frequency of personal and possessive pronouns, the Wordsmith tool has been used where the wordlist tool has been used to extract the instances of all the occurrences of pronouns mentioned above. For the purpose of analysis, the personal pronoun 'It' has not been studied as the basic purpose of this research is to highlight how personal pronouns reflect on speakers' personality and state their opinion. 'It' is also not studied as in the interviews it largely refers back to environmental degradation.

Data Analysis

Interview with Bangladeshi Student

 The analysis of interview from the Bangladeshi student reveals that the usage of the personal pronoun 'they' (f=22) is more prominent followed by the possessive pronoun 'our' (f=5), 'my' (f=4), and 'their' (f=4). There is only one case of absolute possessive pronoun.

<u>**Pronominal Choice "I"**</u>

First Person Pronoun (Singular)

The case of 'I' here actually refers to the speaker as an individual, and in this particular case, it sheds light on the speaker's personality. "What should I say actually" (A:2) can mean multiple things; it can refer to speaker's lack of knowledge pertaining to the reasons behind the environmental degradation as well as it may suggest her confusion over the issue. Both the supposition seems plausible as in the interview, she fails to list the reasons in question 2 and instead her answer was more based upon the problems arising from environmental degradation.

Possessive Case

The possessive pronoun 'my' is used by the speaker primarily to state her opinion on the subject of environmental degradation. 'My opinion/s'(f=2) and 'my thinking'(f=2) are used by the speaker (in A: 1,2 and 5). The choice of 'my' is interesting in the A:1 as environmental degradation is defined in a more subjective way where the speaker clearly refers to her individual voice.

Figure 1: Collocation Network of Possessive Pronoun "My"

The interconnection between *my, thinking* and *opinion* is closely knitted together, where they share various collocates. A complex network is present between them which signifies their interdependence on one another to convey the meaning. Common collocates between *my* and *opinion,* are *environment* and *degradation*, which refer to the speaker's individual voice on environmental degradation. Though the diagram shows the connection between *my* and *country*, yet this collocate is not positioned at N-1 or N+ 1. They are both used in the same sentence. The important collocate between *my* and *thinking* is *reason,* where the speaker has intentionally used it to express her views on the reasons behind environmental degradation. If one observes closely, the Graph coll reveals the multiple identities assumed by the speaker at the same time. *My* collocates with *opinions*, which further collocates with *our*. This forms a chain signifying how the speaker's use of pronouns reveals her dual identities, where at the same time she is carrying her individual voice and at the same time she positions herself as a part of a larger community.

Pronominal Choice: They
Third Person Pronoun (Plural)
The case of 'they' is a bit complicated as it refers back to multiple actors. The Graph coll reveals the 'peoples' with an MI value of 5.18, as one of the strongest collocates with 'they'. The qualitative analysis, on the other hand, reveals that 'they' is used by the speaker to refer back to multiple actors, like the Bangladeshi Government (f=8), their NGOs (f=7), and the general public (f=7). From the frequency count, there is not much difference between the values. The contextual use of 'they' by the speaker sheds light on the responsibility factor, where primarily the government is responsible for countering environmental degradation.
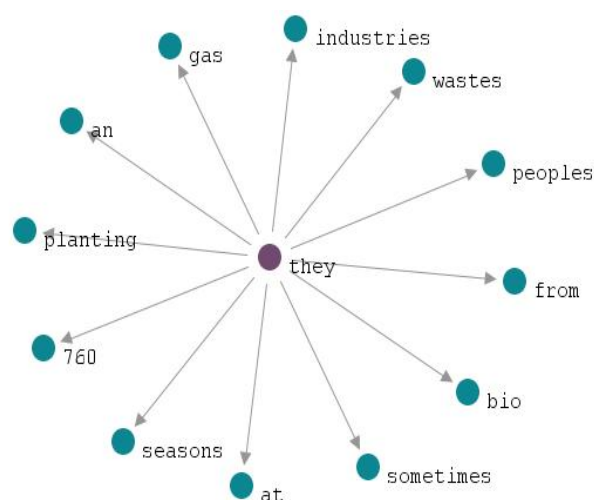
Figure 2: Collocation of Third Person Pronoun "They"

Possessive Case:
With respect to the choice of 'their', the possessiveness is described in the domain of the general public. The speaker has used it multiple times but only in A:5. The contextual evidence provides much deeper insight. 'We should understand them that they can ahm make their life betters with ahm tree plantations' (A=5) implies that whatever measures would be taken against environmental degradation, the beneficiaries will be the general public. The graph reveals the collocation network for their where lexemes like *resolving, betters, make, good,* and *use* all point towards the action that can help the general public to reduce environmental degradation.
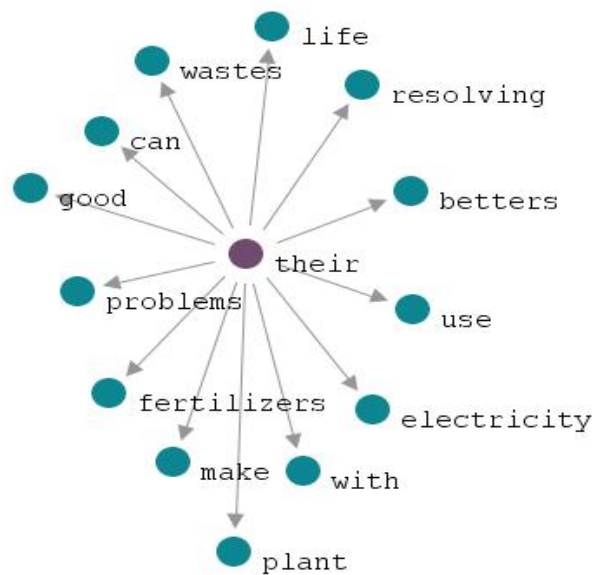
Figure 3: Collocation of Third Person Plural Possessive "They"

Pronominal Choice: We
First Person Pronoun (Plural)
The use of 'we' by the Bangladeshi interviewee is generic in nature. 'We should ahm help all the people educated or uneducated each and every people should say we should understand them that they can ahm make their life betters with ahm tree plantations'(A:5). The speaker includes herself in the domain of general public to emphasize that each individual has the duty to educate others regarding the measures which can be taken to minimize environmental degradation. In this way, she positions herself as a part of a larger community having a duty towards environmental protection.

The MI value of we and people is 6.05. The collocation network reveals that both are interconnected with each other at multiple points like *every, help, understand, like, say* etc. The purpose of the speaker in choosing 'we' is not only to position herself as a part of the larger community but also to emphasize how the general public, including herself, can perform their environmental responsibility.
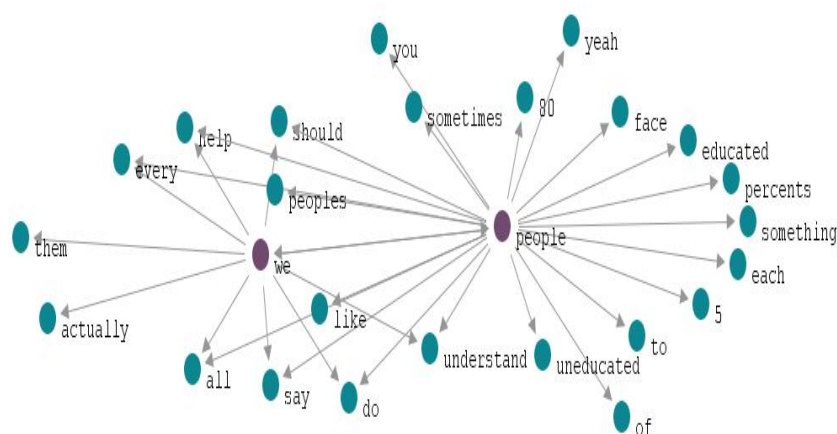
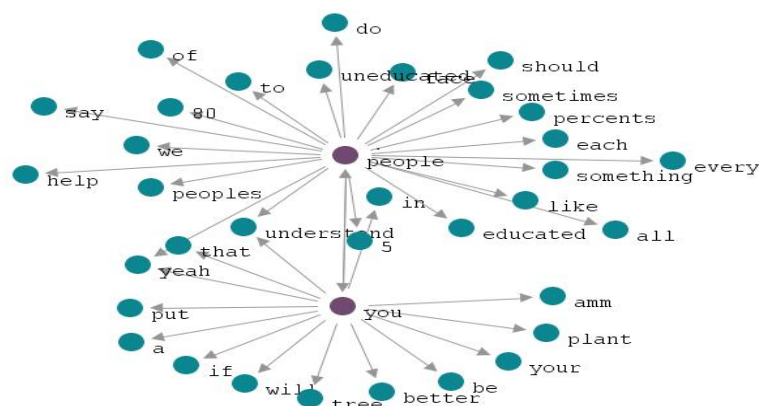**Figure 4: Collocation Network of First-Person Plural "We"**

Possessive Case
With respect to the choice of 'our', it is particularly used in the possessive case where 'our country' (f=3) and 'our environment' (f=2) have been used by the speaker to show collective

possessiveness with her country as well as the environment. It defines the speaker not as a particular individual but a member of the larger group. When 'our' is used with 'country', it is a specific reference to Bangladeshi nationals, whereas when used with 'environment', it becomes generic, where the speaker positions herself as a part of human race.

The MI value for 'our country' and 'our environment' is same i.e., 6.32. The collocation network reveals the connection between the pronoun 'our' with both the lexemes. The frequency is set at 1, and threshold level is set at 5. 'Our' and 'environment' have 'opinions' as the point of union signifying the purpose of the speaker by using 'our' is to express her opinion (as a part of member of a larger community) on the issue of environment. When 'our' is used with the country, the intended purpose of the speaker is to emphasise her national identity and to speak about the issues related with the environment in her country.

Figure 5: Collocation Network of First-Person Plural Possessive "Our"

Pronominal Choice: You

Second Person Pronoun: The interviewee uses 'you' twice, but she is not addressing the interviewer. In her case, she uses the pronoun while discussing the role of the Bangladeshi government to counter environmental degradation. From the context, it becomes evident that the 'you' is a situational reference to Bangladeshi people.

Figure 6: Collocation Network of Second Person "You"

From the Graph Coll, it becomes further clear that 'you' collocates with 'people' and both are tied together through other words. A network between 'you' and 'people' describes the interconnection between the two. Due to the small data, frequency is set at 1, and to see the

strong collocates, the threshold level is set at 5. The MI value of 'you' and 'people' is 5.05 which cannot be termed as higher in general but with reference to the corpus and other collocates used, it can be said that a strong bond exists between 'you' and 'people'.

She chooses not to use 'we' perhaps because she is now living in Austria, and what is explained in A: 4 was more based upon the measures taken in Bangladesh. The other reason can be simply tied to English as a second language. Keeping in view her sentence construction, it can be said that she faces problems both on a lexical and a grammatical level to adequately convey her intended meaning.

Possessive Case

With respect to the possessive case of *your*, due to an accent issue, the sentence is not clear to the researcher, so it is not possible to analyse this case.

Interview with Pakistani Student:

With respect to the choice of pronouns, Pakistani student uses *they* (f=9) as the most frequent, followed by *I* (f=6) and *our* (f=5). Like the Bangladeshi student, she has also used variety of pronouns during the interview.

Pronominal Choice "I"

First Person Pronoun (Singular)

I is the second most frequent pronoun used by the Pakistani interviewee. With the frequency of 6, the most important function of *I* is to express the views of the speaker.

The pronoun has been used by the speaker to express her opinion on various issues. In 'I think these two are the main outcomes of environmental degradation' (A:3), *I* has been used to express the problems which she thinks arise from environmental degradation. Similarly, in 'I haven't seen any such serious measures and policies that are taken by the national government'(A:3), *I* has been used by the interviewee for the purpose of narrating that she herself has not witnessed any policies concerning the environment. She takes a much stronger stance in 'I think so our provincial government is more serious than the national government' (A:4), where in her view her provincial government has been more concerned about the issues related to the environment. In the last answer, *I* have been used by the interviewee to give suggestions to her national government as she says, 'I think national government needs to be more serious about this issue'(A:5).

The Graph Coll further explains this through the collocation network. With an MI value of 6.15, *think* collocates with *I*, by forming an overlap of various other lexemes. *Government* is one such node where they join together, implying that *I* have been used with *think* to talk about the government. Contextual knowledge is required here as primarily when the interviewee speaks about government it means the Pakistani government (both national and
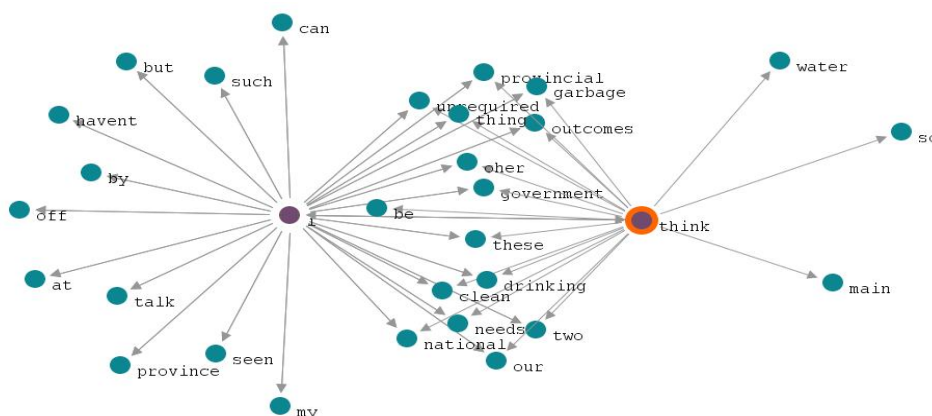

provincial).

Figure 7: Collocation Network of First-Person Pronoun "I"

Possessive Case

My has been used by the interviewee twice. It has been used to express her opinion as she says, 'provincial government is more serious than the national government and as far as the civil community is concerned ahm in my opinion this is actually ah, this is actually the thing.'(A:4). But her opinion is not clear regarding the civil community as she has not discussed the issue concerning the role of civil society.

In other instance, *my* have been used to show attachment with the province. Use of *my* with *province* highlights her provincial identity. In 'But I can talk about my province'(A:4), the combination is used to talk about the positive initiatives taken by her provincial government.

With an MI value of 7.75, *my* collocates with *opinion,* showing a stronger association as compared with *province* with an MI value of 6.74. It is important to note that '*my opinion*' and '*my province'* has been used with the same frequency. This highlights that sometimes,
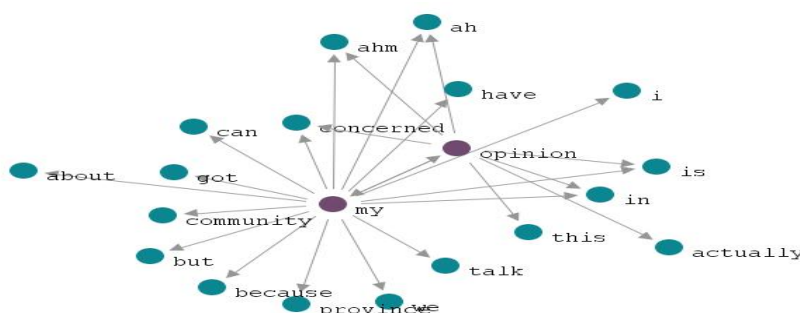
the MI value cannot be taken as the only means of measuring the association.

Figure 7: Collocation Network of First-Person Possessive Pronoun "My"

Pronominal Choice "We"

First Person Pronoun (Plural)

The personal pronoun *we* is mainly used to show affiliation with a group to seek an identity. In case of the Pakistani student, *we* have been used twice to indicate her inclusion in the Pakistani community. In 'we are having majority of the diseases are water borne and polluted air'(A:3,) *we* refers to the Pakistani community in general, whereas in 'we have got a new provincial government'(A:4,) her focus in much on provincial identity. This can be due to two reasons, i.e., she wants to invoke her provincial identity as she takes pride in it, or she thinks that the new provincial government is handling the issue in a better way.
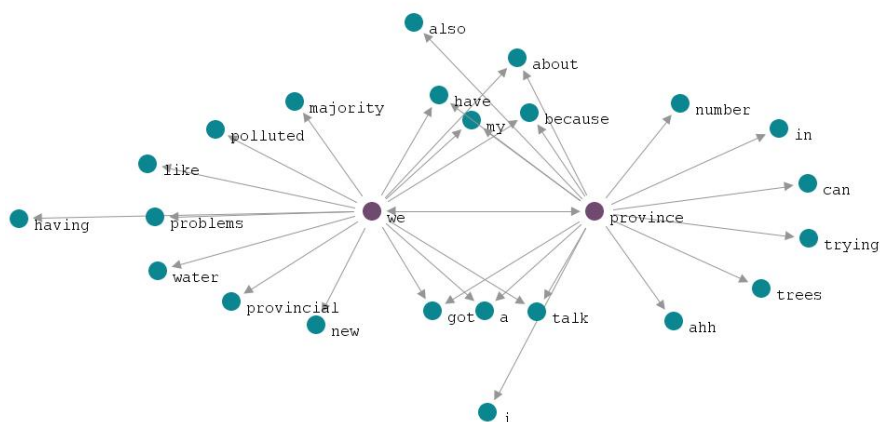
Figure 8: Collocation Network of First-Person Plural Pronoun "We"

We collocates with *province,* with an MI value of 6.74. The graph shows that *my* is a common node, which signifies the change in identities of the interviewee when she is talking about her province.

Possessive Case

The possessive pronoun *our* (f=5) has been used by the interviewee to show her possessive attitude towards the government, be it national or provincial.
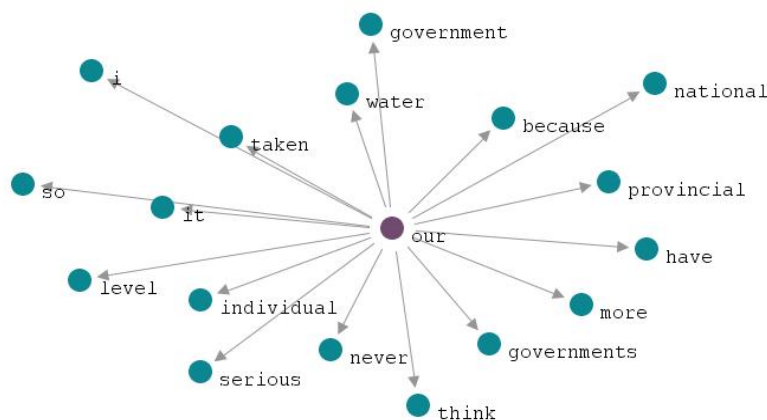
Figure 9: Collocation Network of First-Person Plural Pronoun "Our"

Pronominal Choice "You"

Second Person Pronoun

The case of you seems simple in this interview, as it is used primarily to include everyone. It has been used by the interview to refer to define environmental degradation where every individual is involved in bad environmental practices. The Graph Coll further illustrates this point, where *you* collocates with *defined* with an MI value of 7.16.
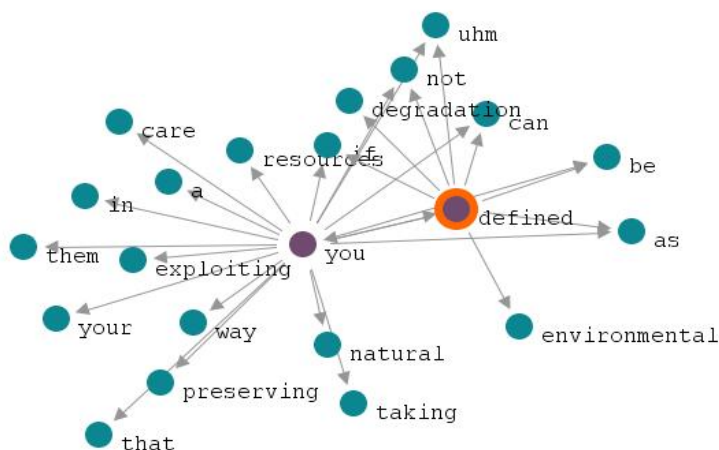
Figure: 10 Collocation Network of Second-Person Pronoun "You"

The collocate *preserving* and *care* with *you* seem to carry positive value but the negation mark *does not spin* the meaning and negative association is formed.

Possessive Case: *Your* has been used by the interviewee twice in the interview while answering question 1. In both cases it has been used while defining environmental degradation. As already explained that *you* have been used for everyone, in the first instance 'if you are not taking care of your natural resources' (A:1), *your* implies that the *resources* belong to everyone, which are not being preserved. The Graph Coll presents a network of collocates with *your*. The collocate *generations* with *your,* means here that the interviewee wants to make a point that environmental degradation is a matter of grave concern, which can negatively affect future generations.
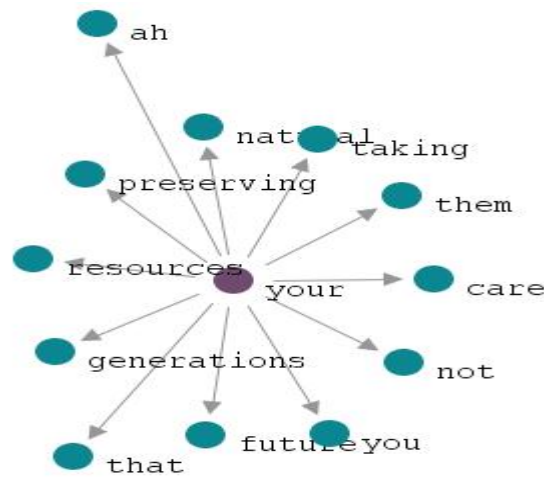
Figure 11: Collocation of Second Person Possessive Pronoun "Your"

Pronominal Choice "They"
Third Person Pronoun
They (f=9) is the most frequent pronoun used by the interviewee to refer back to multiple actors.

They has been used 6 times to refer to the provincial government, whereas, it has been used once for the national government. Similarly, it has been used once to refer to policies and the general public. The use of *not* with *seriously,* and *functional* associate negative meaning.
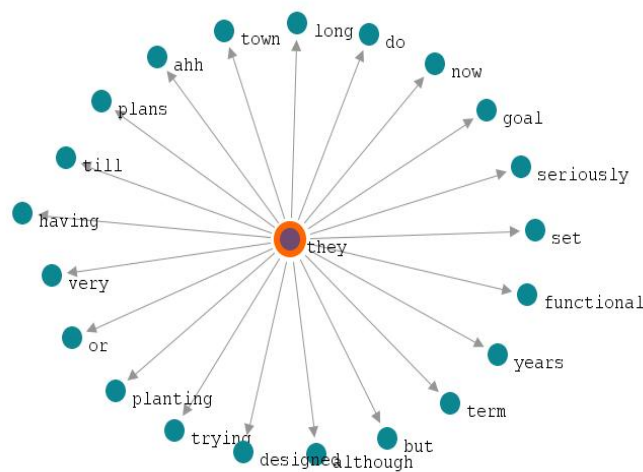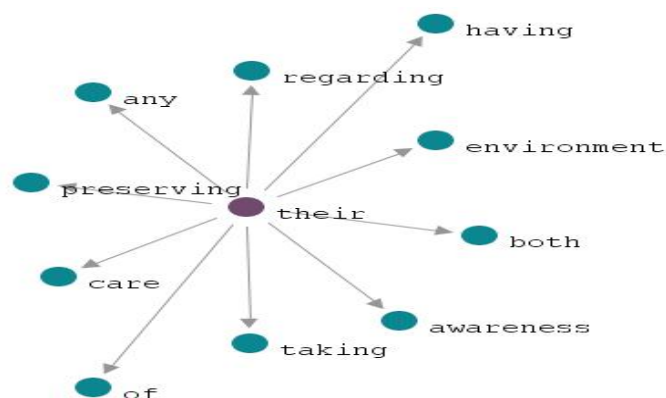

Figure 12: Collocation of Third Person Plural Pronoun "They"

Possessive Case
Their has been used twice by the interviewee. It has been used with *environment* as the interviewee says, 'The general public has no sense of uhm uhm, hm no sense of like uhm they are not having any awareness regarding preserving their environment and taking care of their environment.'

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Figure 13: Collocation of Third Person Possessive Plural Pronoun "Their"

Their has been used to refer back to the general public (here it means Pakistani nationals) and at the same time, the purpose of the interviewee to use *their* is to establish a relationship between the environment and the general public. It is difficult to decide whether the interviewee includes herself in the domain of a general public or not as by using *their,* it can be said that she has excluded herself from the category. The graph shows the network of collocates with *their*, where *care* has MI value of 7.74 followed by 7.38 with *environment.* By using the negation marker *not,* the positive collocates like care, preserving, and awareness carry negative association where the interview points out the lack of concern by the general public towards these things.

Conclusion
The way people use language and its verbal elements, such as pronouns, verbs, and the specific combinations of these verbal elements, can represent multiple meanings with regard to people's identities, their individual or communal approach towards a specific topic. Additionally, through revealing these representations, it can be seen that people's choice of specific words, as well as pronouns addresses their meaning making processes that encompass people's sense of belonging to a specific community, their individual, as well as communal norms. On a parallel level, this analysis which encompasses the pronominal choices of the interviewees with regard to their ideas about the environmental degradation in their home countries, tries to bring a perspective towards their meaning-making processes through language and try to understand how their pronominal choices can address to different meanings. In this sense, throughout this paper, the focus on their pronominal choices of "I", "You", "We", and "They" in the students' interviews have been the predominant approach and has been functional in the sense that it brings a different perspective to understand how their pronominal choices effect their representation towards their identities, as well as their understanding towards the problems, their sense of responsibility and willingness to solve these problems related to environmental degradation.

The results are mostly concerned with the fact that the use of "I" among the students comes to represent the individual knowledge of the students. With regard to their specific pronominal choice of "I", it is revealed that the students want to establish their personal opinions and highlight how they make sense of their environment in their countries. Their use of "we" mostly represents how they have the sense of collective identity towards their countries, as well as showing their willingness to solve the problems concerning environmental degradation. This representation through the use of "we" shows how they feel responsible for their own nation and offer collective solutions towards environmental degradation, which represents how they are willing to offer a solution and include themselves as a citizen of their own countries, as well as indirectly highlighting the duties of other citizens. "They", on a different level, stands as a representation for the responsible organizations and entities concerning the environment. Their choice of "they", in this sense, highlights the fact that they want to address the responsibilities of these organizations as well as stating these entities' lack of concern towards the environment. To sum it up, this analysis has established a perspective that encompasses these students' use of pronouns as well as building a bridge between these pronominal choices and their possible representative aspects that tell about the students' personal identities, their collective identities as citizens of their countries.

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List of Abbreviations

A:1= Answer 1
A:2= Answer 2
A:3= Answer 3
A:4= Answer 4
A:5= Answer 5
B=Bangladeshi interviewee
f=frequency
MI=Mutual information
P=Pakistani interviewee